

CHAPTER ELEVEN

UNDERSTANDING STRENGTH OF WILL

MICHAEL BRENT

Richard Holton has presented an important criticism of two prominent accounts of action, a criticism that employs a notion of strength of will. Holton claims that these well-known accounts of action cannot explain cases in which an agent adheres to the dictates of a previous resolution in spite of a persistent desire to the contrary. In this chapter, I present an explanation and defense of Holton's criticism of these accounts of action, and then I argue that while Holton highlights a crucial deficiency in both, his own explanation of strength of will is problematic.

1. Strength of will as adherence to a resolution

How do you succeed in persisting with a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary? For example, imagine that you have recently decided to give up espresso and that you now desire to refrain from doing so. Imagine further that unaware of your decision I present you with the opportunity to drink a freshly brewed espresso from your favorite café and you find yourself with a compelling desire to accept my offer, one whose influence is felt more powerfully than your previous desire. In spite of this strong desire, though, you refrain from accepting my offer, thereby adhering to your previous decision and displaying what shall here be called *strength of will*. According to Richard Holton, two prominent accounts of action cannot explain cases in which you manage to do this sort of thing.¹ He describes the two accounts² as follows:

The Humean Account: All action is explained in terms of your beliefs and desires, where you act on whichever of your desires are strongest.³ On this account, when you adhere to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself must be understood either as the strongest desire or the strongest combination of beliefs and desires.

The Modified Humean Account: All action is explained in terms of your beliefs, desires, and intentions, where intentions are a *sui generis* kind of motivational factor, irreducible to the other two, and where you act on whichever motivational factor is strongest.⁴ On this account, when you adhere to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself is the strongest motivational factor.

How might a proponent of the Humean Account of action explain such cases? According to Holton, the most promising way to explain strength of will on the Humean Account is as follows. Using the above example, after deciding that you should give up espresso, you thereby come to desire that you refrain from drinking espresso rather than doing so. When presented with the opportunity to drink a freshly brewed cup from your favorite café, though, you are confronted with a compelling desire to drink it, a desire that is felt more powerfully than the previous desire to refrain from drinking. If the Humean Account of action is correct and you must act on your strongest desire, then you will succumb to the compelling desire to drink espresso and thereby fail to display strength of will. So how might people who are confronted with this pattern of desires show strength of will? What might the proponent of the Humean Account say?

Holton identifies two options, one in which further desires are added to the mix, and another that involves adding further beliefs. For the first option, Holton suggests that the proponent of the Humean Account could add a strong desire to adhere to your previous decision, thereby understanding a resolution as special kind of desire that is designed to block compelling desires to the contrary.⁵ Here, a resolution is a second-order desire to be unmoved by particular first-order desires. Thus, at the moment in time when you are confronted with a compelling desire to drink an espresso, provided that your second-order desire to be unmoved by precisely this kind of first-order desire is stronger than the first-order desire itself, you have a desire-driven way in which you can resist the temptation to break with your previous decision.

For the second option, Holton suggests that the proponent of the Humean Account could add a further belief rather than an additional desire.⁶ The belief in question involves accepting two propositions: (a) if you resist the next espresso, you will give up drinking espresso for good; (b) if you fail to resist the next cup of espresso, you will fail to give up drinking espresso for good. The first proposition expresses the idea that resisting the next cup of espresso will be an *effective* means of giving up espresso for good, so that accepting the proposition will enable you to

believe that resisting the desire to drink the next cup of espresso will play an instrumental role in realizing your desire to give up espresso for good. The second proposition expresses the idea that resisting the next cup of espresso is *necessary* in order for you to be successful in giving up espresso for good, so that accepting the proposition will enable you to avoid believing that you can *both* drink the next cup of espresso *and* be successful in giving up espresso for good. Here, a resolution is a two-pronged belief that is designed to reinforce the motivational power of your decision in the presence of strong inclinations to do otherwise. Thus, at the moment when you are confronted with a compelling desire to drink a cup of espresso, provided that you believe both propositions to be true, you have a belief-driven way in which you can strengthen your desire to resist the temptation to break with your previous decision.

Now, according to Holton, neither option saves the Humean Account of action from the charge of implausibility. Why? Even if we incorporate the above responses into the Humean Account, it maintains that adhering to a resolution consists in the triumph of a stronger desire over a weaker one, a victory that occurs in any situation in which you act in light of your strongest desire. Thus, if the Humean Account were correct, then we would expect that the experience of acting in light of your strongest desire in mundane cases would be *just like or identical to* the experience of acting in accordance with a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary, since in both cases your action results simply from the triumph of a stronger desire over a weaker one. But this is not correct, says Holton, for it is often the case that you must *struggle* to maintain a resolution in the face of a desire to do otherwise. That is, it is often the case that you adhere to a resolution only by way of struggling to resist or overcome a compelling desire to the contrary. The struggle to maintain a resolution in such circumstances is importantly different from what occurs when you make a decision amongst a variety of mundane options or simply act in light of your strongest desire, and Holton is correct to point out that such struggle is omitted by the Humean Account of action precisely because the account explains action only in terms of beliefs and desires, where you act on whichever desire is strongest.

How might we explain this kind of struggle? Holton suggests that we might augment the Humean Account along the lines suggested by proponents of the Modified Humean Account of action. In so doing, intentions are understood to be neither desires nor a conjunction of desires and beliefs, but as a unique kind of mental state, irreducible to the other two. Intentions are motivating states that can move one to act and that can preserve the motivational force of an earlier belief or desire, even if the

earlier belief or desire is no longer present to mind, and even if there are contrary desires urging one to do otherwise. On this account, a resolution can be seen as a particular kind of intention that one forms precisely so as to defeat any contrary desires that might emerge at a later point in time.

It is worth emphasizing the ways in which this Modified Account of a resolution differs from that offered by proponents of the Humean Account. On the Modified Account, the number of motivational factors is enlarged, so that to be motivated to act, one need not require a desire and a belief, and action need not be the result of whichever desire is the strongest. An intention can exert its own kind of motivational force, so that even in the absence of the desire or belief that gave rise to it in the first place, the intention can overcome whatever desires are present at the time of action. Rather than saying that one acts always to satisfy one's strongest desire, the Modified Account claims that one acts always in light of one's strongest motivational factor, which includes one's beliefs, desires, and intentions. Thus, when an agent adheres to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself is the strongest motivational factor.

Holton thinks that the Modified Humean Account of action is in trouble for the same reason that he thinks that the original Humean Account is problematic. The trouble is that both accounts omit a crucial element that is present in many cases where one adheres to the dictates of a resolution: namely, the *struggle* required when forcing oneself to remain resolute in the face of a desire to the contrary. The Modified Account of a resolution construes success in such cases in terms of the strength of a particular motivational factor, so that strength of will occurs when one *lets* the strongest of one's motivational factors have its way. Here, the struggle that can occur in situations where one displays of strength of will is not accounted for. I shall say more about Holton's criticism below, after introducing his account of strength of will.

2. Holton's account of strength of will

Holton thinks that the best way to explain strength of will is by introducing another motivational factor into the equation, namely, that of *willpower*. Introducing the notion of willpower enables us to explain strength of will in terms of your beliefs, desires, intentions *and* the strength of your willpower, understood as a separate factor. According to Holton, the notion of willpower is that of a cognitive capacity that you actively employ as such. It can be likened to a muscle, insofar as it requires a distinctive kind of effort to use, it can tire in the short term, and it can be strengthened over time. Explaining strength of will in terms of a

distinctive notion of willpower incorporates the fact that often times you must struggle in order to resist the temptation of a compelling desire that threatens to subvert your resolution. The struggle itself is something that you do or do not exert, and Holton claims that it is required because you are actively employing your willpower in the attempt to overcome a desire to the contrary. That is, the struggle is evidence that you are using a distinctive cognitive capacity to remain resolute in the presence of a desire to do otherwise.

Crucially, for Holton the struggle to resist a compelling desire is not straightforwardly physical, such as that involved when lifting a heavy object or walking uphill, since it can be present whether the resolution is to perform an action or to refrain from performing an action. Holton claims that no matter how strong the desire to drink espresso might be, it is not the case that the struggle to resist it consists in actually preventing muscles that are straining to reach for the cup. Rather, the struggle involved in resisting a desire that threatens to thwart a resolution is best understood as *mental*. In particular, it is the mental act of *refusing* to revise a resolution by not reconsidering it, in spite of the presence of a powerful inclination to do just that.⁷ The state of mind in question is one in which you are aware of the resolution, and perhaps even the consideration(s) for which it was originally adopted, but it is not reconsidered or reevaluated. You merely call it to mind in a kind of passive rehearsal, and you do not allow yourself to embark on a procedure that would be involved in revising it. Here, you must struggle in order to call to mind the resolution at precisely the moment at which it is being threatened by a competing inclination to do otherwise. When all goes well, you are able to resist the tempting course of action *by* refusing to revise and reconsider a resolution designed to prohibit that very course of action.⁸ Thus, strength of will is the ability to retain a firm and unwavering commitment to your resolution by calling the resolution to mind at the moment in time when it is needed and refusing to reconsider or alter it in any way.

What evidence is there that such a distinct capacity exists? Holton provides three sources of evidence that the capacity is distinct, each from recent research in social psychology. First, the ability to abide by a resolution looks to be affected by factors that are distinct from the beliefs, desires, intentions, and resolutions themselves. For example, reformed alcoholics, dieters, and people who are trying to quit smoking are more likely to forgo their commitment to abstaining from alcohol, food, or cigarettes when they are depressed, anxious, or tired.⁹ States of this kind systematically affect your ability to act in line with *all* of your resolutions, be they resolutions not to drink, not to over-eat, not to smoke, or whatever.

According to Holton, the most likely explanation of this fact is that such states do not systematically strengthen your desires to perform the prohibited actions, but rather they inhibit your ability to follow any resolution that you might have formed.

Second, it appears that willpower is limited. For example, forcing yourself to eat radishes rather than chocolate makes you less likely to persist later on in solving a difficult puzzle, and suppressing your emotional reactions to a film makes you less likely to persist later on in maintaining your grip on a handle.¹⁰ According to Holton, the most likely explanation of such facts is that the ability to sustain a resolution is affected by the strength of your willpower at that moment in time. That is, it seems that the ability to persist in a course of action is determined not simply by the strength of your desires, beliefs, intentions, and resolutions, but also by the strength of your willpower, precisely that motivational factor that appears to be depleted by repeated or earlier use.

Third, it seems that your willpower can be developed and strengthened by repeated practice. Experimental subjects who undergo a regime of self-regulatory exercises, such as working on the improvement of posture, display a significantly reduced tendency to suffer from depletion of willpower.¹¹ Much like Aristotle's claim that you can become virtuous by acting virtuously, it appears that you can become strong-willed by acting in precisely that way.

As Holton himself admits, such evidence does not conclusively prove that such a capacity exists, but I think he is correct to suggest that it provides additional and compelling grounds to think that there is a distinct cognitive capacity that is employed when actively recalling and refusing to reconsider a resolution in the face of compelling desires to do just that. Indeed, postulating the existence of such a capacity does seem to be a promising way of explaining the distinctive kind of struggle that is displayed in cases where you act in this kind of strong-willed manner. As they currently stand, both the original Humean Account and the Modified version do not have the resources for explaining the characteristic struggle that you exert when overcoming a strong desire that threatens to undermine a resolution. Both depict the strong-willed agent in an impoverished way, omitting a crucial feature of action that seems present in many different situations. However, although Holton has raised an important and successful criticism of both accounts of action, his own explanation of strength of will is not without its difficulties, as we shall see in the next section.

3. Problems for Holton

There are two related reasons why Holton's account of strength of will is problematic. The first concerns the causal necessity of the mental action of recalling the relevant resolution and refusing to revise it, and the second concerns its relative causal strength. Holton has not offered an explanation of the *causal process* by which strength of will occurs in the kind of case introduced in §1, nor has he specified *why* displaying strength of will requires that you recall a resolution and refuse to revise it, rather than, say, simply refusing to perform the pertinent action. The second problem is that, rather surprisingly, Holton's account of strength of will lacks an explication of the notion of *strength*. The result is that it is unclear whether his account is applicable in cases where an action that is already underway is threatened by a pernicious desire. Let's examine each in turn.¹²

First, Holton says very little about how we are to understand the mental action of refusal. Specifically, he does not offer an explanation of its *causal role* in enabling you to overcome the powerful desire that threatens to undermine your resolution and thereby refrain from performing the relevant action. We are thus left wondering *why* as a strong-willed agent it is necessary that you recall the resolution and actively refuse to revise it as part of the process by which you overcome the pernicious desire. For instance, Holton does not specify whether refusing to alter the resolution thereby increases its relative motivational strength, or whether it diminishes or altogether blocks the motivational force of the problematic desire, or whether it functions in another way altogether. As a result, it is unclear whether, for the strong-willed agent, the act of recalling the resolution and refusing to alter it *makes* that resolution stronger than the threatening desire, or whether that act *suppresses* the motivational strength of the threatening desire without affecting that of the resolution, or something else entirely. Moreover, even if we assume on Holton's behalf that the act of recall and refusal functions in one of these ways, *how* does doing so enable you to refrain from performing an action that would satisfy the threatening desire? After all, it seems possible that two otherwise indistinguishable agents, both of whom have previously resolved to refrain from drinking espresso and are presently confronted with an equally potent desire to drink a freshly brewed cup, might successfully recall that resolution and refuse to alter it in any way, and yet one such agent drinks the espresso whereas the other agent does not. From a causal perspective, what might explain the difference between such otherwise identical agents? The account presented by Holton suggests only that strong-willed agents tend to be capable of

refusing to alter the relevant resolution, but this does not explain the causal process by which refusing to alter a resolution can enable one agent but not the other to refrain from performing the relevant action. As a result, we are left wanting an explanation of the difference between such otherwise identical agents, from the perspective of the causal factors at work. I shall return to this point below.

In addition, Holton has not explained why the action of recalling and refusing to revise your resolution is a causally necessary feature of the process by which you display strength of will. Thus, his account does not rule out the possibility that you can overcome a potentially threatening desire not by refusing to revise your resolution, but by refusing to perform the relevant action. Holton assumes that in cases where you display strength of will, the problematic desire is a desire that threatens your prior resolution. This, however, is not obviously correct. When confronted with the opportunity to drink an espresso and the very potent desire to do so, that desire seems to threaten your resolution only indirectly. In order for the newly acquired desire to threaten your resolution, it seems that you must be aware of the conflict between this new desire and your resolution, and that succumbing to this new desire would thereby undermine the latter. But even granting you an awareness of this, why must you also refuse to revise your resolution so as to avoid drinking the espresso? Why not refuse to drink it outright, as it were, without refusing to revise your resolution? The mental action of recalling and refusing to revise your resolution is a potentially *unnecessary* step in the process by which you overcome a pernicious desire, so Holton owes an explanation of why it should play this role.

Now, the second reason why the account of strength of will offered by Holton is problematic is that, rather surprisingly, it lacks an exposition of the notion of *strength*. Willpower, says Holton, is a cognitive capacity the direct exercise of which consists in the mental action of recalling a resolution and refusing to reconsider it. If this cognitive capacity is sufficiently robust, then doing so will enable you to succeed in adhering to your resolution. But what does it mean for this cognitive capacity to be sufficiently robust? In what does its relative strength consist? Holton does not say, and this is problematic. This is problematic because there are cases in which recalling a resolution and refusing to reconsider it seems to be *causally insufficient*, yet you nevertheless display strength of will. For example, consider a scenario in which you display strength of will when persisting in the performance of an action that is already underway. Imagine that after a lengthy process of deliberation you recently decided to run a marathon, formed a resolution to do so, and embarked on an

ambitious training plan. Imagine further that today is the day of the race, conditions are normal, and you are in the midst of running the twenty-third mile. As you are nearing the end of that mile, you are suddenly confronted with a *very* strong desire to give up: you are in pain and near exhaustion, you no longer believe that you can finish the race, and you desire to stop running more so than you desire to finish. Finally, imagine that in spite of all this, you manage to overcome that desire, pain, and near exhaustion and complete the marathon, thereby adhering to your resolution and displaying strength of will.

Does Holton's account apply in such cases? That is, does his account explain how it is that you are able to force yourself to continue running in spite of your newly acquired desire, the pain and exhaustion, and lack of self-confidence, thereby adhering to your resolution and displaying strength of will? The example suggests that, in cases where an action is already underway, adhering to your original resolution requires *more* than calling it to mind and refusing to revise it. In addition, while you are in the midst of exercising what Holton describes as willpower, you must *also* force yourself to remain in motion while overcoming the new desire to stop, the looming self-doubt, and the pain and near exhaustion. That is, you must also exert a great amount of effort so as to *force* your legs to remain in motion in spite of the potent desire to stop running the race.

Crucially, the exertion of effort required to sustain and control your bodily capacities in such demanding scenarios is *different* from that required to recall your resolution and refuse to alter it, insofar as it is deployed in a distinctively bodily manner to sustain the ongoing activity of the requisite bodily capacities. Such effort is not accounted for by Holton's description of what happens when you display strength of will, since his account restricts the applicability of the notion of effort to the use of the relevant cognitive capacity when refusing to alter a resolution. Displaying strength of will in cases of this kind requires that you continue to perform the relevant bodily action the moment that your newly acquired desire to stop running is felt more powerfully than your resolution to continue, as well as during your recall of the resolution, and even as you refuse to alter your resolution. In each moment during this process of recall and refusal, you remain in motion as a result of your ongoing exertion of effort, which sustains the movement of your legs and body, and which is distinct from the effort that you exert while using the cognitive capacity that figures in Holton's account. Thus, since Holton restricts the applicability of the notion of willpower by construing it as a cognitive capacity that you employ specifically when refusing to alter a resolution in light of a pernicious desire, his account does not apply in situations where the

relevant action is already underway and the effort that you exert so as to continue performing that action is more than merely cognitive.

4. Beyond mere adherence

Once we acknowledge this wider causal role of your exertion of effort during the performance of your action, we can provide a more persuasive and comprehensive account of strength of will. Recall the above-mentioned agents who are otherwise indistinguishable and who have both resolved to avoid drinking espresso and yet only one manages to adhere to the relevant resolution when confronted with a potent desire to drink an espresso. From the perspective of the relevant causal factors at work, the difference between these agents is not explained merely in terms of their awareness of the relevant resolution, their recalling it in the way that Holton describes, and their refusal to alter it. That is, when confronted with such a compelling desire, the act of recalling and refusing to revise that resolution can be a part of the process by which a potent desire to the contrary is overcome, and this can require a distinctive kind of effort, namely, that of remaining steadfast in your thoughts. But just as in scenarios where the relevant action is already underway, the activity of bringing the resolution to awareness and refusing to alter it is not sufficient for causally initiating, sustaining, and controlling the requisite bodily capacities in the manner demanded by the resolution. In fact, the resolution itself, just like the relevant desires, beliefs, and intentions, is not causally sufficient for this. It seems that *you* are causally responsible for this, inasmuch as through your exertion of effort you are initiating, sustaining, and controlling the activity of your bodily capacities and the relevant action, in light of the resolution that you have called to mind, and in addition to your act of refusing to alter it.

Notice that for the proponent of the Humean and Modified Humean Accounts of action, the explanation of action requires that we refer only to your *states of mind* in which your desires, beliefs, or intentions are present, rather than to you, the agent. Indeed, the connection between both Humean Accounts and the philosophical commitments of David Hume himself are particularly relevant here.¹³ Famously, Hume denied that there was any such thing as you *qua* agent (or “the self”), in addition to the states of mind (or “perceptions of the mind”) that are present to awareness at any given moment in time, connected by what he described as the Principles of Association. It seems that contemporary proponents of both Humean Accounts retain an inexplicit commitment to such a picture of the agent. By highlighting your active and causal role in cases where you display

strength of will in overcoming an urge that threatens to undermine the action that you are in the midst of performing, the assumption that we need not refer to your causal contribution in our explanation of action is problematic.

Unfortunately, the account of strength of will offered by Holton does not fare much better. Although I disagree with the details of his account, Holton nevertheless recognizes a distinctive and active causal contribution for you, the agent, a role that is made explicit by cases in which you display strength of will, as Holton describes that notion. For Holton, by recalling a resolution without revising or reevaluating it, you become aware of the resolution at precisely the moment when doing so is required and, when all goes well, are thereby able to overcome a compelling desire to the contrary. But this places severe limitations on the active causal role that you play during the performance of your bodily actions, especially in cases where what Holton describes as strength of will is not required. It is only in cases where you must intervene, so to speak, and overcome the force of a potent desire, that we see a distinctively active and causal role for you during your performance of an action. For Holton, when strength of will is not required, the strongest of your desires, beliefs, and intentions cause the action that you perform. This can be understood as a commitment to a kind of *psychological determinism*, in which bodily actions are causally determined by your desires, beliefs, intentions, and other such motivational factors, rather than you, the agent.¹⁴ It is the underlying commitment to this claim that is the most problematic aspect of Holton's account of strength of will.

5. Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have presented and further supported Richard Holton's novel criticism of both the Humean and the Modified Humean Accounts of action, and claimed that, although headed in the right direction, the positive account of strength of will offered by Holton requires emendation. In particular, I argued that, on Holton's account of strength of will, we are left wanting an explanation of how, exactly, you increase the motivational efficacy of a resolution simply by bringing it to awareness without revision or reevaluation, and that Holton's account does not appear applicable to cases where you resist a strong desire that threatens to undermine the action that you are in the midst of performing and have resolved to complete. When we limit our conception of willpower to the kinds of cases that Holton considers, we limit ourselves to thinking of willpower as a cognitive capacity limited to the mental

action of refusing to revise or alter a resolution. In response to these difficulties, I suggested that what's missing from the account of strength of will presented by Holton is acknowledgement of the wider role of your exertion of effort, as evinced by cases where you force yourself to continue performing an action that is already underway as you resist a potent desire to the contrary, in addition to those sorts of scenarios described by Holton, where you display strength of will in overcoming a potent desire that threatens to undermine a prior resolution.¹⁵

References

- Baumeister, R., T.F. Heatherton, and D.M. Tice 1994, *Losing Control: How and Why People Fail at Self-Regulation*, San Diego: Academic Press
- Baumeister, R., E. Bratslavsky, M. Muraven, and D.M. Tice 1998, "Ego-Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (5), 1252
- Brandt, R. 1988, "The Structure of Virtue", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1), 64
- Bratman, M. 1989, *Intention, Plans and Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Davidson, D. 2001, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", *Essays on Actions and Events*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Holton, R. 1999, "Intention and Weakness of Will", *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (5), 241
- . 2003, "How Is Strength of Will Possible?" in Stroud S. and C. Tappolet (eds.), *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, New York: Oxford University Press
- . 2009, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Hume, D. (1739-1740) 1975, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Kennett, J. and M. Smith 1996, "Frog and Toad Lose Control", *Analysis* 56 (2), 63
- Kennett, J. and M. Smith 1997, "Synchronic Self-Control is Always Non-Actional", *Analysis* 57 (2), 123
- Kennett, J. 2001, *Agency and Responsibility: A Common-Sense Moral Psychology*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Mele, A. 1987, *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Self-Control*, New York: Oxford University Press

- . 1998, “Synchronic Self-Control Revisited: Frog and Toad Shape Up”, *Analysis* 58 (4), 305
- . 2003, *Motivation and Agency*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Muraven, M., R. Baumeister, and D.M. Tice 1999, “Longitudinal Improvement of Self-Regulation Through Practice: Building Self-Control Strength Through Repeated Exercise”, *The Journal of Social Psychology* 139 (4), 446
- Pettit, P. and M. Smith 1993, “Brandt on Self-Control”, in Hooker B. (ed.), *Rationality, Rules, and Utility: New Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Richard Brandt*, Boulder: Westview Press, 33
- Velleman, J.D. 1992, “What Happens When Someone Acts?”, *Mind* 101 (403), 461

Notes

¹ See Holton (1999, 2003, 2009).

² Note that the accounts of action in question are an instance of what J. David Velleman (1992) has dubbed the standard story of action. Both accounts depict bodily actions as events that are caused by the onset of those of your beliefs, desires, intentions, and other motivational factors that make intelligible your performance of the action in question. Part of Holton’s interest in these accounts is whether they can explain your ability to adhere to a resolution in the face of a strong desire to the contrary, given the way that they account for the causation of action. See Holton (2003, p. 40).

³ Proponents of this account include Davidson (2001).

⁴ Holton cites the work of Michael Bratman (1989). Note that when Holton presents both accounts of action, he does not specify what it means to say of a belief, desire, intention, or other motivational factor that it is “strongest”. Very roughly put, we can assume that all else being equal, for one desire, A, to be stronger than another desire, B, is for you to be disposed to act upon A rather than B, where you believe that each desire can be satisfied by performing a specific action.

⁵ Defenders of a desire-based option include Brandt (1988) and Mele (1987, 1998, 2003).

⁶ Defenders of a belief-based account include Pettit and Smith (1993); Kennett and Smith (1996, 1997) and Kennett (2001).

⁷ For Holton, the difference between the *reconsideration* of a resolution and the *revision* of a resolution is this: to revise a resolution is to alter it in some way; to reconsider a resolution is to suspend it and thereby open oneself to the possibility of revising it. In order to *refuse* to reconsider a resolution and thereby to abide by its dictates in the presence of a compelling desire to do otherwise, Holton thinks that one must actively exercise this distinct cognitive capacity.

⁸ Holton does not put the point precisely in this way, but I think it is the most perspicuous way to do so. As I shall argue below, this aspect of Holton's account of strength of will is problematic.

⁹ Holton cites Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice (1994, pp. 151ff).

¹⁰ Holton cites empirical literature on what is called "ego depletion". See Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven and Tice (1998, pp. 1252-65).

¹¹ Holton cites Muraven, Baumeister and Tice (1999).

¹² It is important to note that there are interesting normative issues related to strength of will, such as whether there are conditions in which it would be *inappropriate* for you to adhere to a resolution, say, that I shall here set aside. My worries with the account that Holton offers concern only its *causal* dimension.

¹³ See Hume (1739-40, p. 252).

¹⁴ Note that "*psychological* determinism" is distinct from "*physical* determinism", the latter of which is a claim that some physicists and philosophers are in the business of investigating.

¹⁵ For helpful discussion of earlier versions of this paper, I thank Akeel Bilgrami, Carol Rovane, Taylor Carman, Janet Metcalfe, Mario De Caro, Anubav Vasudevan, Marco J. Nathan, Brian H. Kim, Alex Madva, Katie Gasdaglis, Katherine Rickus, and Andrei Buckareff.